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policy review

Volunteering and employability: implications for policy and practice

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In this article, we argue that if the principal aim of a volunteering programme is to provide a route into employment, its effectiveness can be improved if the participants acquire the specific skills, knowledge and attitudes that employers need. Volunteering programmes where enhancing employability is only one of several desired outcomes should focus primarily on other benefits of volunteering, with a realistic expectation of how much (or little) volunteering can contribute as a direct pathway into employment.

key words volunteering employability • back-to-work programmes • unemployment

Introduction

Governments in England have a long history of initiating and supporting programmes that encourage people to volunteer, in part at least to enhance their employability and increase their chances of securing paid work (Finnegan, 2013). However, in our recent studies (Ellis Paine et al, 2013; Kamerāde, 2013), we found that while volunteering may provide individual employability-related benefits, such as enhanced skills and networks, these do not translate directly into paid work for many out-of-work participants: while volunteering may have a positive effect on moves into work for some individuals in some circumstances, for others it has no effect on employment.

This article builds on the earlier studies to explore the policy and programme implications of the existing evidence on links between volunteering, employability and employment. We begin with a brief review of relevant government policies programmes. Then we summarise evidence on the effectiveness of volunteering as a route into paid employment, before going on to consider the implications for future programme design. We make a distinction between ‘individual employability’ – individual factors affecting the supply side of the labour market, such as knowledge, skills and attitudes – and employment as an outcome of employability (Fugate et al, 2004; McArdle et al, 2007). Drawing on wider human resource development literature, we suggest that if the principal aim of a volunteering programme is to provide a route into employment, designing targeted programmes that equip volunteers with the specific skills, knowledge and attitudes that are in high demand among employers may improve success rates. In programmes where enhancing employability is one of several desired outcomes, we suggest that the focus should be on the wider

contribution that volunteering can make to individuals and communities, with a realistic expectation of how much (or little) volunteering can contribute as a direct pathway into employment.

Key policies and programmes linking volunteering and employability

A brief history of volunteering for employability policy and programmes

The assumption that volunteering can contribute to employability and provide a route into employment has been a consistent feature within recent policy discourse and in government-funded programmes, as volunteering is expected to contribute to solving a variety of social problems, including unemployment (Ockenden, 2007; Finnegan, 2013). Included within the Volunteer Compact Code of Good Practice (Home Office, 2005: section 5.3), for example, is the statement that '[v]olunteering can help tackle social exclusion. Individuals can improve their skills and employability and can show that they have a contribution to make to society'. Much volunteering policy, and practice, of course extends beyond employability agendas, but for the purposes of this article we focus only on those policies and programmes where increased employability was or is as at least one of the stated objectives (for more comprehensive reviews of volunteering policy and programmes in general, see Sheard, 1995; Zimmeck, 2010; Finnegan, 2013). Our aim here is to present a selection of examples that represent some of the best-known or best-evidenced programmes over the last 30 years or so, not to provide a comprehensive overview or analysis of all recent volunteering policy or all volunteering for employability programmes.

Addressing unemployment became a prominent feature of volunteering policies and programmes during the 1980s. According to Sheard (1995: 118), it was at this time that 'the government turned to volunteering to protect society from the threats associated with the return of mass unemployment'. Two programmes were established by the then Conservative government to engage unemployed people in volunteering. The *Opportunities for Volunteering* programme was launched by the Department for Health and Social Security in 1982, aiming 'to enable unemployed people to participate in voluntary work in the health and/or social services fields' (Zimmeck, 2010: 89). It ran for 18 years. Although its ambition was to offer volunteering to unemployed people, other people could also participate, and its aims were as much about achieving outcomes for health and social services as about achieving outcomes for volunteers themselves. The *Voluntary Projects Programme* was launched as part of the Manpower Services Commission, later on in 1982. It had the specific aim of providing volunteering opportunities and training to long-term unemployed young people to enhance their skills and consequently to provide a route into paid work or further training (Zimmeck, 2010).

As unemployment levels fell towards the middle of the 1980s and as evidence emerged that questioned the effectiveness of volunteering in providing a route back into work for unemployed people (eg, Gay and Hatch, 1983), less emphasis was placed on the role of volunteering for addressing unemployment or enhancing employability more generally (Sheard, 1995). The focus shifted instead to the role that volunteering could play in addressing other policy agendas such as active citizenship, and indeed to increasingly recognising the value of volunteering as an end in itself

– or, as Zimmeck (2010) puts it, the ‘intrinsic value’ of volunteering. Reflecting this more holistic approach, the *Make a Difference* initiative, for example, was launched by John Major’s Conservative government in 1994, with nine objectives focusing on enhancing engagement in volunteering, rather than on explicitly stated instrumental outcomes such as enhanced employability (Zimmeck, 2010).

This ‘more holistic’ approach to volunteering continued with the election of New Labour in 1997 (Zimmeck, 2010), which saw volunteering as a way to address a wide array of policy agendas, from civil renewal to criminal justice, while also being seen as a good in its own right (Rochester et al, 2012). Numerous volunteering programmes were launched by New Labour: Finnegan (2012) identifies 39 volunteering initiatives funded by the government between 1997 and 2010. Their aims and objectives were diverse and often multiple, including increasing the quantity, quality and diversity of volunteers and/or volunteering opportunities (Ellis Paine, 2009).

In among the mix, many of New Labour’s volunteering programmes had achieving a variety of personal benefits for volunteers as one of their objectives; a few explicitly included enhanced employability, others referred to the link within wider publicity materials. The *Young Volunteer Challenge*, for example, was launched by the Department for Education and Skills in 2003, with the aim of engaging young people from low-income backgrounds in full-time volunteering. Among a set of objectives, the programme sought to facilitate young people’s personal development and to increase the likelihood of positive outcomes – including moves into education, employment and training (GHK Consulting, 2006).

Also targeted at young people, *v* was launched in 2006 with the aim of engaging one million more young people in volunteering and community action. It had a set of objectives approved by its board in 2010, which included: ‘To encourage skills development through volunteering/community action as a means of improving employment prospects for young people’ (NatCen et al, 2011). The youth volunteering programme that was the predecessor to the *v* programme – *Millennium Volunteers* – which was funded by the Department for Education and Skills between 1999 and 2008, did not have an explicitly stated aim or objective relating to employability/employment, but did have as one of its strap lines: ‘MV for your CV’ (IVR, 2002). The Department of Health’s *Health and Social Care Volunteering Fund*, launched in the final years of New Labour (and continued by the coalition government) has as one of its programme priorities ‘building healthy and resilient communities and supporting the Big Society’ – an evaluation reports on its contribution to volunteers’ employability (South et al, 2013: 2).

For the majority of New Labour’s time in office, then, while volunteering was increasingly aligned with welfare-to-work policies (Hardill and Baines, 2011: 35), enhancing employability was most often one of many secondary objectives within volunteering policy and programmes, or an implicitly assumed benefit of volunteering, highlighted within programme promotional materials and wider policy (and practice and media) rhetoric. It was persistent in its presence but balanced against other expectations for what volunteering could achieve. Only at the end of the era, at the beginning of the 2008 financial crisis and the onset of recession, did it rise to the fore through the creation of two programmes with the specific aim of using volunteering to enhance the employability of unemployed people.

In 2007, the *Personal Best* programme was launched, inspired by the forthcoming London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games, which aimed to help unemployed

people to ‘develop new skills, raise their self-esteem and confidence, and open up employment and education opportunities’ and thus to ‘reduce worklessness’ (London 2012 Organising Committee, 2010). Personal Best was a pre-employment programme, providing accreditation, skills and experience, with the aim of helping 20,000 people move into work. This programme offered volunteering opportunities and training for a vocational qualification in event management. The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills had overall accountability for the programme, with responsibility for funding and delivery devolved to several different organisations. In London, 6,473 individuals, most of them unemployed or economically inactive, took part in the programme, the expenditure for which totalled £4.05 million by 2011 (SQW, 2011).

As the recession deepened and unemployment levels rose, in 2009 the £8 million *Volunteer Brokerage Scheme* (aka *Work Focused Volunteer Placement Scheme*) was launched by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), with the aim of matching 42,000 (later revised down to 34,000) long-term unemployed people with volunteering opportunities. The scheme was part of the government’s wider *Six Month Offer*, which provided additional advisory support for all Jobseeker’s Allowance claimants after six months. Four specific services were offered by the advisers, each on a voluntary basis:

- work-focused training;
- recruitment subsidy;
- self-employment;
- volunteering.

The volunteering service worked through claimants who expressed an interest in volunteering being directed to a third sector broker who would find them a volunteering opportunity to match their job-related interests and skills (Adams et al, 2011). The volunteering placements were to be ‘short term and work focused placements designed to enhance customer skills and boost a customer’s CV’ (DWP Welfare to Work and Equality Group, 2009: 3). The Volunteer Brokerage Scheme ran between April 2009 and November 2010.

As the Volunteer Brokerage Scheme was coming to an end, in October 2010 the newly elected coalition government launched a new volunteering for employability initiative – *Work Together* – through the DWP. It is one of several supplementary initiatives introduced as a part of *Get Britain Working* – the coalition’s government’s programme to reduce unemployment. *Work Together* aims to ‘encourage unemployed people to consider volunteering as a way of improving their employment prospects while they are looking for work’ (DWP, 2011a: para 14). It is delivered locally by Jobcentre Plus through a combination of signposting unemployed people who are interested in volunteering to relevant opportunities and/or to information about volunteering, and engaging with local voluntary and community sector organisations to enhance working relationships and encourage organisations to develop opportunities for unemployed people to volunteer. It is a programme without any funding for providers of the volunteering opportunities or brokerage services (Volunteering England, 2010). Indeed, as one DWP (2011b: 4) document notes: ‘*Work Together* is not a “scheme” as such; it is a strengthening of Jobcentre Plus links with local voluntary sector organisations so that advisers are better able to help people move into them.’ We have found no reference to publicly stated targets, budgets or evaluations.

As reflected within and beyond *Work Together*, the coalition government has continued the rhetoric of the value of volunteering for enhancing employability and

for providing wider social value. However, volunteering has often been subsumed by the government within the wider concept of ‘social action’, with the stated intention of making ‘social action the social norm’ (HM Government, 2011). The Big Society agenda ‘intended to encourage more volunteering and local action’ (Hardill and Baines, 2011: 21); seeing social action as a way of empowering local people to deliver services. Although the coalition government has been less enthusiastic about freestanding, funded initiatives and less targeted in its approach than New Labour (Zimmeck and Rochester, 2011), several other programmes, funding streams and campaigns have been created, some of which have focused, to some extent at least, on using volunteering to enhance employability. The *Step Up to Serve* campaign, for example, was launched in November 2013, calling people to sign up to volunteer, with the aim of doubling participation among young people. The campaign highlights the role of volunteering in tackling unemployment and in enhancing employability more generally (Prime Minister’s Office, 2013) and encompasses the National Citizens Service as one of the mechanisms for increasing young people’s participation. The Centre for Social Action, established within the Cabinet Office in partnership with the charity Nesta and offering several funding streams, has six objectives that focus on growing and supporting social action, alongside five priority thematic areas, one of which is ‘contributing to prosperity’ by, for example, developing employment. Beyond that, however, we are not aware of any of the coalition government’s other volunteering-related initiatives (eg, *Community First*, *Community Organisers*) having explicitly stated objectives connecting volunteering with employability and employment.

Volunteering within employability programmes, and employability within volunteering programmes

In summary, the assumed relationship between volunteering, employability and employment has been a persistent feature of government rhetoric for at least the last 30 years, with specific programmes set up to facilitate this contribution. Two types of volunteering and employability programmes are distinguishable across time. The first are labour market initiatives where improved employability through volunteering is the principal aim. These programmes are relatively rare and emerge during periods of economic downturn. They are: the Voluntary Projects Programme, Personal Best, the Volunteer Brokerage Scheme and Work Together.

The second are volunteering programmes where the main aim is to increase the quantity and/or quality of volunteering, and employability is only one of many stated benefits or outcomes of volunteering through the programme (eg, Young Volunteer Challenge, Millennium Volunteers, v). This second type of programme has been more common, particularly when the economy has been stronger. These programmes are generally not specifically targeted at unemployed people, although some are targeted at groups of people associated with high levels of unemployment, such as young people and disabled people.

Overall, however, it is worth putting things into perspective. On the one hand, despite all these programmes, government investment in volunteering is only a very small proportion of that spent on labour market initiatives as a whole. Volunteering and employability programmes have remained somewhat peripheral to labour market policy tools. At the same time, much volunteering continues outside of the influences of these schemes – only a relative minority of volunteers claim to be motivated

to volunteer by a desire to enhance their employment prospects (see, for example, Low et al, 2007) and, we suggest, only a minority of volunteering opportunities are conceived with the primary intention of enhancing the employability of those who fill them. Most, we suggest, are designed primarily to be of benefit to the recipient of services/activities delivered by the volunteers, with any benefits to the volunteers themselves being secondary.

On the other hand, however, it seems that the rhetoric surrounding volunteering and employability has been persistent and pervasive. In 2009, it was reported that over one third of Volunteer Centres were working in the area of volunteering and employability (Rochester et al, 2009), other funders also support volunteering and employability projects – the Big Lottery Fund, for example, is currently funding the *Volunteering for Stronger Communities* programme, one of the objectives of which is to enhance employability (Bashir et al, 2013), while the encouragement of volunteering among university students (in part at least) as a means of enhancing employability has also become commonplace (see, for example, Holdsworth and Quinn, 2010). The assertion that volunteering enhances employability and provides a route into paid employment is, then, commonly made. To what extent is this assumption supported by existing evidence?

Volunteering and employability: a summary of the evidence

Volunteering literature

Some insights into the relationships between volunteering and employability come from volunteering research. Several studies suggest that volunteering does, in the long term, contribute to what McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) call ‘individual employability’ factors, through enhancing knowledge, skills, work attitudes, confidence, self-esteem, mental and physical health and wellbeing (Hirst, 2001; Corden and Sainsbury, 2005; Newton et al, 2011; Nichols and Ralston, 2011).

However, evidence on the extent to which these ‘individual employability’ gains translate into paid employment is weak. In general, our earlier studies (Ellis Paine et al, 2013; Kamerāde, 2013) found that while volunteering may have a positive effect on moves into work for some individuals in some circumstances, for others it may have no effect at all, suggesting that the relationship between volunteering, employability and employment is complex. In summary, the literature has found that the effects of volunteering on gaining employment vary by the following factors, many of which are also likely to have a combined effect (for further details, see Ellis Paine et al, 2013; Kamerāde, 2013):

- demographics – age (Strauß, 2008; Ellis Paine et al, 2013) and gender (Strauß, 2008) have, for example, been found to make a difference;
- the frequency of engagement – with too much or too little volunteering seeming to weaken the effect (Hirst, 2001; Ellis Paine et al, 2013);
- reasons for being out of work – the effects of volunteering on moves into employment are different for unemployed people as compared with people who are undertaking family care or are economically inactive due to long-term sickness or disability, for example (Ellis Paine et al, 2013);
- duration of unemployment (Trickey et al, 1998);

- motivation for volunteering – being motivated to volunteer by a desire to enhance employability improves the chances of volunteering leading to employment (Hirst, 2001);
- volunteer role – the nature and diversity of the volunteer role and its fit with the paid role being sought influence outcomes (Hirst, 2001);
- the nature and quality of support provided to volunteers (eg, Gay and Hatch, 1983; Hirst, 2001).

It would seem that positive gains to ‘individual employability’ factors are not always enough to overcome the structural inequalities that limit chances of certain people moving into paid work. While volunteering may contribute to the development of individual skills, work attitudes, confidence, health and wellbeing – to ‘individual employability’ – it is unlikely to affect ‘external employability’ factors such as the availability of suitable job openings in a particular locality or occupation, and employers’ prejudices.

Most of the studies, however, look at the effects of volunteering in general on employability and/or on its effects on all people out of work. As noted above, much volunteering takes place outside of employability-related agendas. Current data from volunteering research and the statistical analyses of these are not detailed enough to shed light on whether volunteering is more effective as a route into paid work when undertaken as part of a programme specifically aimed to facilitate this, or with it as a secondary objective. Neither are they detailed or systematic enough to allow us to differentiate its effects depending on whether or not participants are motivated to volunteer by employability-related reasons, although qualitative findings suggest that this may be the case. It may be unreasonable to expect volunteering to have such an effect, given that many individual volunteers have no expectation or aspiration for volunteering to enhance their employability and many are engaged in activities that are not connected to employability-related opportunities or programmes.

Reviewing programme evaluations

Given the lack of definitive answers from volunteering research, what do the evaluation reports for the programmes described above have to say about the link between volunteering and employability? What can they tell us about whether/to what extent volunteering is more effective in enhancing employability if it is carried out as part of a volunteering and employability programme, or what difference there is in employment outcomes within volunteering in programmes where employability is the primary aim or a secondary objective?

Expectations for the impact of volunteering on employability and employment could arguably be highest when it is undertaken as part of a programme that has this as its main aim. At the same time, however, the individuals targeted through such programmes are generally the most disadvantaged in the labour market – long-term unemployed people – creating particular challenges for the achievement of positive employment outcomes. Further, the external factors affecting employability and representing the ‘demand side’ of the labour market (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005) are largely ignored by labour market initiatives promoting volunteering, placing limits on what volunteering should be expected to achieve in terms of providing a direct route into paid work.

Unfortunately, evaluation reports or official statistical data are not publicly available for all programmes, including the current Work Together initiative (DWP, 2013). Below we summarise findings from some of the key programme evaluations that are available, although some caution needs to be exercised when comparing the results because, for example, different programmes have different timescales within which a participant has to secure paid work to count as ‘moved into employment’.

An evaluation of Personal Best in London reported that 31% of participants who were ‘unemployed and looking for work’ prior to the programme entered into employment after participating; the figure was 16% of those who were ‘economically inactive’. Overall, the evaluation reported that 27% of previously out-of-work beneficiaries progressed into employment after taking part in the programme. Of those who moved into employment, 16% said that they would definitely not have found employment without the support of the programme; while 31% felt that they would have found employment anyway (SQW, 2011).

An evaluation of the Six Month Offer found that 11% of the volunteer strand participants had entered into paid work and attributed their success in getting their job to the support received through the programme (Adams et al, 2011). Compared with participants in the other three strands – work-focused training, recruitment subsidy and self-employment – volunteer strand participants tended to be furthest from the job market – they were older and repeat or long-term claimants, facing considerable barriers to work. There was some suggestion that volunteering was seen as a ‘last option’ by some advisers, and also that some participants felt compelled to volunteer (Vegeris et al, 2010). The placements they engaged in lasted an average of three months and involved 12 hours per week of volunteering. However, the volunteering experiences varied considerably. The evaluation concluded: ‘While participation in these strands [volunteering and training] may have been beneficial in terms of soft outcomes there is very little evidence to suggest that these strands provided claimants with a direct ‘stepping stone’ into paid employment or links to real labour market opportunities’ (Adams et al, 2011: 76). It was also noted, however, that a focus on hard employment outcomes may mask other benefits that many participants experienced.

Turning now to volunteering programmes where enhancing employability was a secondary objective, we find additional information. The formative evaluation of the v programme, for example, reported that while 90% of grant recipients believed that receiving funding had led to young people improving their chances of getting a job in the future, the individual monitoring data indicated that 15% of the participants moved into paid work after volunteering (NatCen et al, 2011). Within the Young Volunteer Challenge, which was targeted at young people from low-income backgrounds, the evaluation reported that levels of progression into employment after full-time volunteering within the programme varied according to the occupational qualification levels of participants – while 31% of leavers with a higher (level 3) occupational qualification progressed into employment, this fell to 28% of those with a lower (level 2) vocational qualification and 16% for those with no qualifications at all (GHK Consulting, 2006). It is not clear what proportion of those moving into work attributed the change in their status to volunteering in these programmes.

Overall, it is difficult to judge the success of volunteering for employability programmes from the percentages gaining employment given in evaluation reports, not least because it is unusual for an evaluation to include a comparable control group of people not engaged in the programme. It would seem, however, that compared with

volunteering in general, the chances of volunteering leading to paid employment may be increased when volunteering occurs within a specific volunteering programme but it is still only a minority of participants who secure a paid job at the end of their engagement and attribute this to their volunteering experience.

Looking elsewhere, at other (non-volunteering) employability programmes, one possible benchmark for the proportion of unemployed people moving into employment as a result of taking part in such a programme, could be the DWP Work Programme. Early data suggest that, on average, 11% of unemployed people involved in the Work Programme have found a paid job and remained there for six months (or three months for members of 'harder-to-help' unemployed groups) (calculations by Rees et al, 2013, based on the 2013 DWP data). Using this benchmark for a very rough comparison, both types of volunteering programmes seem to be as or more effective than the DWP Work Programme.

Evidence from wider human resource development literature

In this subsection we look beyond volunteering initiatives to draw on evidence from other fields that may provide insights as to the factors that enhance employability and which contribute to the success of programmes that seek to achieve employment outcomes. If we take a human resource development perspective, then volunteering for employability purposes through programmes such as those outlined above is a human resource development activity like, for example, training, mentoring and experiential learning – in other words, a planned intervention with the aim of providing individuals with enhanced personal competence, adaptability and employability (Harrison, 2009: 8). Indeed, research also suggests that some volunteers see volunteering as an employability-enhancing activity that has the potential to provide job-related skills (Caudron, 1994; Tuffrey, 2003; Peterson, 2004; Low et al, 2007).

Literature on the principles of good practice of human resource development suggests that in order for employability interventions to be effective they need to be underpinned by development needs analysis and targeted in such a way as to address the gaps between the knowledge, skills and attitudes (KSAs) that individuals have to offer and the KSAs that employers require (Griggs et al, 2010). Without identification of specific KSA gaps and how they can be addressed, any expenditure on human resource development activity is difficult to justify and is less likely to be effective (Moore and Dutton, 1978).

Some authors suggest that the impact of volunteering may be limited because it does not provide volunteers with skills that they can easily transfer to paid work – the skills 'for which employers are crying out' (Lee, 2010; Vegeris et al, 2010). However, volunteers report that volunteering enhances both their hard skills, such as information technology, language, business management and customer relations skills, and soft skills, such as communication, teamwork skills, routines and time keeping, and discipline (Hirst, 2001; Corden and Sainsbury, 2005; Ockenden and Hill, 2009; Newton et al, 2011; Nichols and Ralston, 2011). Yet, although valuable, these are often not the skills that are most in demand in the current very competitive labour market. According to the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (2014), as many as 22% of all job vacancies are hard to fill, but they are mostly vacancies for which employers cannot find candidates with job-specific, technical or practical skills. The skills that volunteering is reported to enhance are lower down on the employers' list of requirements.

Evidence from human resource development literature therefore suggests that insufficient targeting to address labour market demands for specific skills and experience is likely to reduce the effectiveness of volunteering and employability programmes. While the Personal Best programme offered focused specific training and volunteering in event management, thus addressing a potential skill gap in the labour market, the Volunteer Brokerage Scheme appears to have been less focused on what employers wanted (the demand side) and more on the skills and knowledge each volunteer wanted to develop (the supply side). And from what we can tell, the Work Together initiative seems to be little more than a signposting service with very general employability aims, such as to help unemployed people to maintain or build (unspecified) skills, to gain work experience and build a curriculum vitae (CV) (DWP, 2011b: 3).

This mismatch between supply and demand – that is, the skills gained through volunteering balanced against the skills shortage in the labour market – is not surprising. The predominant focus of current policies and research appears to be on what voluntary organisations and volunteers *think* are increasing the employability of those looking for work (the supply side), and not on what employers are *actually* looking for to meet their needs (the demand side) (Kamerāde, 2013).

Policy implications

What are the implications of the evidence that volunteering helps only a relatively small proportion of people to secure paid employment for policy makers in the government, and indeed volunteer-involving organisations implementing these policies? One response might be to move away from emphasising the link and stop funding volunteering programmes that specifically aim to provide a route to employment through volunteering. But a more positive approach would be to seek to improve the effectiveness of programmes that are specifically designed to enhance employability through volunteering by adopting learning from other human resource development activities. For wider volunteering initiatives, a different approach might be more appropriate: to focus them on the other outcomes that volunteering achieves.

Employability and employment as the main aim of a programme

We propose some steps, based on the best practice principles for human resource development, to improve the effectiveness of volunteering programmes principally aimed at enhancing employability and reducing unemployment (those that we group together as labour market initiatives). These would ensure that volunteering programmes are carefully targeted and designed to provide volunteers with the skills, knowledge and experiences that are in demand in the labour market. Volunteering opportunities structured in this way may provide a more effective route to employment. The steps, which should be completed at the design stage of volunteering and employability programmes both nationally and locally, in consultation with employers and voluntary sector organisations, are as follows:

- Using research data, the KSAs that are in short supply in the labour market and that can be gained through volunteering should be identified.
- The KSA gap between the demands of employers in the labour market and a particular group of unemployed individuals should be identified – a development needs analysis process.
- Where volunteering can address particular KSA gaps should be analysed – that is, where volunteering can provide jobseekers with the skills to fill actual shortages in the labour market. As part of this process, where other human resource development activities – such as training, coaching or mentoring, CV-writing support or other back-to-work support – would be necessary or more effective should be identified.
- In response to this targeted skills and labour market analysis, bespoke volunteering and employability programmes should be designed that equip jobseekers with the KSAs in short supply in the labour market.
- Crucial to success is ensuring that certain volunteering activities are actually effective in reducing the gap between the KSAs that employers demand and the KSAs that particular jobseekers have. This is a key consideration at the programme implementation stage for back-to-work service providers, including volunteer-involving organisations providing volunteering for employability programmes.

Overhauling existing volunteering for employability programmes in this way would need the injection of resources from government, potential employers and volunteer-involving organisations to enable the KSAs gap to be analysed and for new programmes to be developed, implemented and evaluated. However, tailoring the demands and needs of the labour market to the skills of those looking for work could help to lower unemployment, as the jobseekers would have the skills that the employers with vacancies want. These more targeted volunteering for employability programmes could be more cost-effective in terms of getting people back into work.

In the long-term, of course, using volunteering as a targeted human resource development activity may have implications for the nature of volunteering and how the role of the volunteer-involving organisations and the voluntary sector is understood by policy makers, practitioners and society in general. Historically, this has resonance with the 1980s when the emphasis on volunteering as a tool to solve the problem of unemployment left some in the voluntary sector ‘grappling with the philosophical, political and practical implications of linking volunteering with unemployment’ (Sheard, 1995: 119). There is also a separate but related philosophical and policy issue: to what extent should the voluntary sector undertake human resource development activities that might be considered the responsibility of government or employers, or even perhaps individuals themselves?

Employability as a one of several aims

Evidence suggests that it is unrealistic to expect that volunteering in general (ie, volunteering outside of programmes specifically aimed at enhancing employability) will help a sizeable proportion of volunteers to get paid work (Ellis Paine et al, 2013). Even if volunteering gives people the skills and experience necessary to compete in the labour market, it does not create jobs, solve the childcare problems of unemployed parents or change the prejudices of employers.

However, as long as there are realistic expectations for volunteering programmes where enhanced employability is one of several desired outcomes, there is value to retaining them and their inclusion of (individual) employability as one of the potential benefits of involvement to volunteers. Expectations, however, need to be realistic in terms of how effective the programmes can be in directly providing a route into paid work.

Better screening of people who wish to use volunteering as a path into employment may help to identify their aims and motivation, and the subsequent tailoring of the nature of the activities they get involved in and the support they are provided with. These measures are already elements of recommended good practice in volunteer management.

The social benefits of volunteering programmes, and the role of volunteering as a meaningful alternative and/or addition to paid work, further justifies continued government investment. Even if volunteering does not always lead to paid work, it can enhance the skills and knowledge of unemployed individuals, boost their confidence, offer opportunities to meet other people, empower them to make new choices and provide a variety of other individual and societal benefits (Ockenden and Hill, 2009; Rochester et al, 2009; Nichols and Ralston, 2011). As Nichols and Ralston (2011: 900) have argued: ‘Volunteering provides social inclusion benefits beyond employability by enriching volunteers’ lives and empowering them to make new choices.’ Perhaps, then, there should be less focus on employment outcomes and more emphasis on the benefits for society of better-engaged individuals making a different type of contribution to society in general.

Conclusions

The relationship between volunteering, employability and employment is complex. While volunteering may help to improve ‘individual employability’, as Rochester et al (2009: 4) put it, ‘volunteering is not ... a “magic bullet” or a direct route into employment’. Volunteering in general has a relatively weak effect on the move into employment, and volunteering programmes specifically or partly designed to provide paths into work only lead directly to paid work for some participants. The programmes’ effectiveness might be improved if unemployed volunteers on the programmes acquire the specific KSAs that the labour market needs. Better analysis of job market needs through KSA assessment and scrutiny of the skills that volunteering programmes currently provide could help to balance the skills that employers want with the actual skills gained through volunteering. The shift to cut the skills gap might help a larger proportion of unemployed individuals move into paid work. However, it is likely to remain the case that if there are no suitable jobs, no amount of volunteering will help, however focused.

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